



SCHOOL JUSTICE PROJECT

Access to Justice. Access to Education.

SJP's 2022 Year-in-Review

Direct Representation Program

In 2022, SJP served 66 clients through direct representation. SJP attorneys participated in 236 client-related meetings, including school meetings, meetings with agency personnel, and meetings with community-based providers. SJP advocated for clients during 15 court hearings. SJP's education advocacy during sentencing and disposition hearings resulted in mitigation in 92% of cases. Finally, SJP celebrated 10 client graduations.

Client Demographics

The average age of SJP clients when beginning representation is 19 years old. SJP clients are Black (97%) or Latinx (3%). 90% of clients identify as male and 10% identify as female. 100% of clients are eligible for free legal representation, thus meeting the court indigency requirements. Ward 8 has the largest SJP client representation (30%), followed by clients experiencing homelessness (16%).

We have received over 300 referrals since opening doors and have represented 210 individual clients. Referrals come from a variety of sources, though the majority come from defense attorneys (29%) and clients and former clients (26%). About 10% of our cases come from judges, either through direct referrals or court appointments. Other referrals come from civil legal service providers, education attorneys, community-based organizations, and social workers.

Education and Employment

In 2022, 80% of SJP clients were enrolled in an education program. 100% of clients released from incarceration in 2022 re-enrolled in school within 30 days of release.

83% of SJP clients were connected to an enrichment activity during their first year working with SJP, and 72% of SJP clients were connected to a social service during their first year working with SJP. Of those able, 59% of SJP clients were employed after working with SJP for a year.

Empowerment, Leadership, and Community

SJP's model aims to promote empowerment and self-advocacy. 89% of SJP clients reported increased empowerment, as measured by self-expressions of feeling comfortable speaking at meetings and initiating ways for their individual voice to be heard. Clients also demonstrated increased initiative, undertaking major tasks such as securing vital documents, enrolling in school, or touring programs without an attorney for the first time. 96% of SJP clients demonstrated increased knowledge or understanding of education rights. 50% of clients began showing civic engagement via voter registration, community service participation, or initiation of efforts to obtain vital documents and city services.

Systemic Advocacy and Policy Program

SJP continues to advocate for systems reforms to DC’s education and criminal legal systems.

Litigation

In April 2021, SJP, along with co-counsel at Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Terris, Pravlik & Millian, LLP, filed a class action lawsuit in the U.S. District Court in the District of Columbia challenging the lack of special education during the pandemic to students at DC Jail.

On February 16th, 2022, SJP and co-counsel won our contempt motion for the District's failure to comply with the Court's June 16, 2021 preliminary injunction. In his Order, Judge Nichols of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia mandated the District to create individualized plans to rectify educational hours lost since September 1, 2021 (the start date of the injunction); ordered the District to operationalize a remote learning system for students to provide live, virtual instruction; and extended special education eligibility for the time necessary for students to receive the education they would have received had the District complied with the preliminary injunction.

In his order, Judge Nichols stated, “[w]hile things have improved for the month of January, *every* student currently enrolled in the Program remains at an inexcusable educational deficit for this school year—a failure all the more baffling given that the Court entered its Preliminary Injunction months before the school year began.” All eligible members of the class have been awarded contempt relief, and SJP, along with our co-counsel, are working diligently to ensure that the students are able to access the services.

Legislation

Legislation to establish a court appointment panel of special education attorneys for young people in adult criminal court proceedings passed in DC Council. DC Council allotted money for the creation of such a panel in the District’s Fiscal Year 2023 budget.

SJP staff members testified in front of DC Council three times in 2022. Testimony advocated for funding to expand programming within DC Jail, including specialized housing units for emerging adults and educational programs. Testimony also provided suggestions to reduce truancy and chronic absenteeism.

Coalitions

SJP is part of a wide variety of coalitions or collaboratives: Thrive Under 25, Every Student Every Day, Youth Justice Project, Special Education Attorney Roundtable, Special Education Advocacy Coalition, Interagency Council on Homelessness, DC Family Court Training Committee, DC Superior Court’s Juvenile Justice Subcommittee of the Court Education Work Group, DC Legal Services Consortium, DC Legal Aid Transformation Network (Quarterly), and Fair Budget Coalition. SJP attorneys serve as co-chairs for 5 of those coalitions or their subcommittees.

Thrive Under 25 Coalition (Thrive) held its annual strategic planning retreat in August. It was the Coalition’s first return to an in-person event. The event was led by Thrive Chair Sarah Comeau (SJP Director of Programs & Co-Founder), Thrive Vice Chair Gene Downing, and Julie Johnson

from Strategy Forward Advisors. The event kicked off with a spoken word performance by Vice Chair Gene Downing and ended in the creation of a Strategic Plan that outlined the Coalition's goals in the areas of Housing, Education and Workforce Development, and Diversion. Of note for SJP was identifying key education-related goals including supporting the passage of legislation that provides special education attorneys to eligible young people involved in DC's adult criminal legal system and advocating to expand educational programs within DC's jails so that young people can enroll in high school (with credit-bearing courses) while incarcerated.

In December 2022, SJP's Executive Director & Co-Founder Claire Blumenson was confirmed as a Mayoral appointee to the Students in the Care of DC Coordinating Committee. This Committee is charged with ensuring that court-involved students have access to high quality educational and workforce development opportunities.

Community Outreach & Legal Trainings Program

During 2022, SJP staff conducted 11 trainings and presentations for students, juvenile justice agency staff, local government leaders, school staff, and attorneys and advocates from across the country, reaching over 200 participants.

Claire Blumenson was featured on a podcast called "Learning Can't Wait." The podcast episode is described as follows: "School Justice Project (SJP) champions an extremely vulnerable population: incarcerated youth with disabilities. SJP's mission is to ensure every learner, in or out of prison facilities, receives the education they were promised and deserve. Their current class action lawsuit against the DC prison system underscores the impact of their efforts. Featured guest, Claire Blumenson, pulls no punches as she forces us to look, and not to look away, in this pivotal moment." The podcast is available [here](#).

Additionally, SJP attorneys were interviewed by Amplified Media about our class action lawsuit.

On July 27, 2022, SJP held a virtual Summer Summit, which raised over \$55,000 for the organization, all of which went directly to serving older, court-involved students with disabilities. The Summit featured a discussion with three of the attorneys working on Charles H. v. District of Columbia: Tayo Belle, Senior Staff Attorney at SJP, Kaitlin Banner, Deputy Legal Director, Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, and Zenia Sanchez Fuentes, Partner at Terris Pravlik & Millian. The video is available [here](#).

Awards and Accolades

In summer 2022, SJP was proud to be the recipient of The Washington Lawyers' Committee's Outstanding Achievement Award for its work on Charles H. et al. v. District of Columbia. Tayo Belle was an honored guest at the Washington Lawyers' Committee's Wiley A. Branton Awards Luncheon, where she accepted the award for her tireless efforts fighting to ensure that every student detained in DC Jail during the pandemic can access an education.

SJP continues to be included in the Catalogue For Philanthropy's group of outstanding nonprofit organizations in the Washington, DC area.

Claire Blumenson was invited to join a Pahara Fellow cohort, a Fellowship program for leaders working to transform public education.